



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Environmental Science & Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/envsci



African voters indicate lack of support for climate change policies

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2015

Received in revised form 15 April 2016

Accepted 20 June 2016

Keywords:

Climate policy

Climate mitigation

Climate adaptation

African politics

ABSTRACT

Will African voters support climate change policies? By 2020, the United Nations' Green Climate Fund intends to provide tens of billions of dollars per year to African nations to support climate adaptation and mitigation policies. It is widely assumed that African citizens will support implementation of these climate policies. We observe the opposite result. In this article – across two experimental studies – we find evidence that Sub-Saharan African politicians who commit to climate change policies may lose electoral support. Electorally important swing voters with weak party affiliations are least likely to support party statements about climate change. Interviews with standing elected officials from Malawi and South Africa corroborate our experimental findings. The combined results suggest voter preferences may hinder the successful implementation of climate change policy in Sub-Saharan African democracies.

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“Climate change is not a winning electoral strategy. It's not. Not at all.”

– South African District Councillor

1. Introduction

Climate change poses a dire threat to African well-being (Müller et al., 2011; Burke et al., 2009; Lobell et al., 2011). Recognizing this, the United Nations Green Climate Fund intends by 2020 to distribute billions of dollars of climate finance per year to African nations to support climate change adaptation and mitigation policies (van Kerkhoff et al., 2011). These long-run policies are designed to attenuate the severity of climate change's impacts on the continent over the coming decades (Klein and Möhner, 2011). Successfully translating these funds into African climate resiliency is vital.

Unfortunately, there are numerous political barriers to enacting climate change policies on the continent. African democracies are characterized by poor political performance, high levels of corruption, and relatively low levels of political stability (Englebert, 2002). Holding office in Africa tends to be an efficient way

for politicians to become wealthy at the expense of their citizenry (De Sardan, 1999). Politicians may simply steal funds earmarked for climate resilience policies for their own use or may allocate these funds only to have them diverted to projects unrelated to climate change or embezzled by subordinates (Blundo et al., 2006; Reinikka and Svensson, 2004). Even if climate resilience funds are successfully allocated by one politician, there is little guarantee that the results of the next election will not see the funds subsequently stripped (Brunner and Enting, 2014). Such politician-driven corruption is typically cited as the primary challenge to African climate policy implementation (Petherick, 2012).

Depictions like these assume African citizens desire climate policies and that negligent or corrupt politicians might produce failures in policy implementation. However, African voters may not prefer the implementation of policies required to build resilience to a changing climate. The low-levels of economic development on the continent leave the average African living on the equivalent of under five dollars per day (World Bank, 2012). At such low levels of income, short-term needs eclipse future considerations (Holden et al., 1998). These harsh economic realities have led to an African electoral politics characterized by the provisioning of immediate benefits – rather than policy promises – in exchange for votes (Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009). Gifts of corn, rice, chickens, and t-shirts buy votes in many African elections (Bratton, 2008). When the finite resources in African democracies are targeted to providing immediate benefits, fewer

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2016.06.013>

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resources remain for longer-run policy implementation. These factors combine to make campaigning on and enacting policies with widespread and long-term benefits a poor political strategy in many African democracies (Englebert, 2002) (for more detail see Supplementary Information (SI): Policy and Elections in Africa).

Here we report on the results from two experimental studies combined with data from interviews with standing African politicians. We draw the first set of results from large-scale campaign-related surveys we conducted in four districts of Malawi on the day prior to the country's 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections. The second set of results come from – to our knowledge – the inaugural use of Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to study African political attitudes. We draw our qualitative data from interviews with office-holding Malawian and South African politicians.

With the data from these studies we examine four questions. First, might African voters reward politicians who emphasize climate change policies? Second, which voters – strong partisans or electorally important swing voters – are most affected by climate change policy messaging? Third, does including climate change policy as one item on a menu of other important policies on their policy platform increase support for African politicians? Fourth, do African voters believe that politicians espousing climate change policy are more likely to win office than those without climate policy platforms? Finally, we intersperse interview data throughout the following sections to examine African politicians' opinions on each of the above questions.

2. Voter support for climate policy platforms

“Most people in Malawi don't know much about climate change. If you talk of climate change, you are guaranteed to lose votes.”

– Malawian Member of Parliament

Might African voters reward their politicians for emphasizing climate change policies? To assess this first question, we conducted a large experiment embedded in a survey of Malawian voters on the day prior to Malawi's 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections. The areas of Malawi we selected – highlighted in Fig. 1 – represent diverse economic and demographic sectors of Malawi and are highly similar to many areas of other African nations (see SI: Malawi District Descriptions).

If there is an African nation where climate change policy is likely to be politically beneficial, it is Malawi. Malawi is a peaceful nation, elections are generally free and fair, and open political discussion and debate is relatively common (Bratton et al., 2005) (see SI: 2014 Malawian Elections for more details). The country is also highly rural and relies heavily on agricultural income, leaving it likely to be acutely affected by a changing climate (Chinowsky et al., 2014; Morton, 2007).

Our experiment randomly assigned Malawian voters in our survey to receive one of three experimental conditions. Experiments within the context of surveys, or ‘survey experiments’, randomly assign subjects to distinct information conditions and evaluate differences in responses across these conditions. They are frequently employed in the social sciences (Sniderman et al., 1991; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009) and have been shown to alter both actual and reported behaviors (Berger et al., 2008; Hassin et al., 2007). In our experiment, we randomly assigned each subject to receive either (a) a *Short-Run Climate Policy* or (b) a *Long-Run Climate Policy* information condition in the style of common campaign messaging or to receive (c) the *Control* condition of no additional policy information. We designed our treatments to mimic the style of Malawian parties' campaign messaging surrounding the election. We present the experimental conditions' wording, delivered in Malawi's Chichewa language, below.

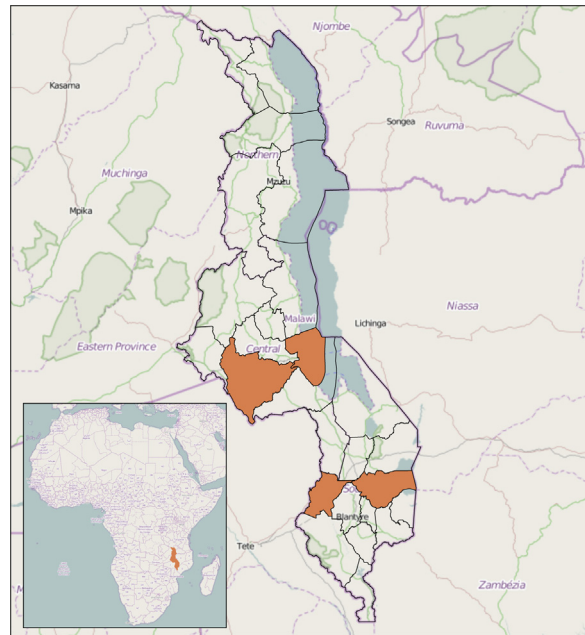


Fig. 1. Map of Malawi election study district locations. We conducted our Malawi election study across four Malawian electoral districts – Lilongwe, Neno, Salima, and Zomba – that vary along demographic, political, and economic factors. These districts provide a broad sampling of Malawian voters (see SI: Malawi District Descriptions).

Short-Run Climate Policy: “Climate change makes farming harder, harming all Malawians. [Respondent's preferred party] will immediately assist struggling farmers.”

Long-Run Climate Policy: “Climate change makes farming harder, harming all Malawians. [Respondent's preferred party] will improve the farming sector to make future farming easier.”

Control: The control condition received no additional policy information.

Prior to administering the experimental conditions, our enumerators filtered out non-voters, obtained respondents' preferred party, and measured the level of support respondents held for this preferred party – information that is freely given to researchers and polling firms in Malawi (Dionne and Dulani, 2014). After the receipt of treatment, participants were given a handful of intervening questions to provide distance between the two points at which we measure our outcome variable. On the last question of the survey, participants were again asked how affiliated they felt with their preferred party.

We take the difference in pre-treatment and post-treatment party support as our primary outcome measure. Similar measures of voter support have corresponded closely to actual reported vote choice (Harbridge and Malhotra, 2011; Wilson and Gomez, 2001). We present the language of this question – delivered in Chichewa – below.

Party Support: How affiliated are you with [respondent's preferred party]? (1) Indifferent; (2) Some; (3) A Lot; (4) Very Much; (5) Completely.

In the Malawi voter sample ($n = 2772$), random assignment to the short-run climate change policy party platform produced no significant change in party support compared to the control condition (see Fig. 2). However, assignment to the long-run climate change policy party platform produced a significant decrease in average change in party support as compared to the control condition (two-sided t -statistic: 2.083, p -value: 0.037, Cohen's d :

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